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CIVIL AND POLITICAL RIGHTS, INCLUDING THE QUESTIONS OF: FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

Written statement* submitted by the International League for the Rights and Liberation of Peoples (LIDLIP), a non-governmental organizations in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[14 January 2002]

*This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

Under this agenda item, the International League for the Rights and Liberation of Peoples

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Under this agenda item, the International League for the Rights and Liberation of Peoples (LIDLIP) would like to bring before the Commission on Human Rights the case of the Pontians, living in the historic region of Pontos, from Sinope (Sinop) to Trapezous (Trabzon) now in Turkey. Our concern is about the restrictions to their freedom of expression showing their cultural identity formed over thousands of years.

The present communication refers to the part of the Pontian people who remained in their historic territories, and elsewhere in Turkey

Historical Background

The presence of the Pontians is traced back in the 8th century B.C., before the emergence of the Pontian Kingdom in the North Coast of Asia Minor. Indeed, Pontian culture roots are to be found in their history, notably during the classical era (with philosophers and historians such as Diogenes, Strabon, etc.) of the Hellenistic period and then in the Byzantine epoch.

After the Ottoman conquest in the middle of the 15th century their living conditions, their unity and communal life as a Christian people, was deeply affected by the system of the Ottoman power and administration, based on the distinction between Muslims and non-Mulims. In the 19th century, due to the Ottoman-Russian wars, the Pontians were subjected to several exoduses. The systematic elimination of the Christian Pontians through mass murder and ethnic cleansing took place in the first quarter of the 20th century and especially between 1916 and 1923, as part of a longstanding policy of thorough turkization of the whole Asia Minor.

The Pontians who could remain in Pontos had become Muslims or were compelled to islamization, thus escaping destruction and dispersion. It is known that the population exchange according to the Lausanne Treaty (1923) between Greece and Turkey was defined on the basis of religion and not on the basis of the ethnic identity of the populations of both sides. The Pontians who took refuge in the Caucausus and in Russia were subjected to further exoduses within the Soviet Union. Now, apart from Greece, a sizable Pontian diaspora is found in USA, Europe, Australia and elsewhere.

An ancient culture in jeopardy of survival

Even though the islamized Pontians of Pontos were for decades deprived of the right to communicate with the Pontians of Greece and of the countries of the ex-Soviet Union, and even though they suffered, for decades systematic policies of disarticulation of their communities, they continue to insist on their particular Pontian identity. "We are Pontians", they declare still today. Especially in the last decades this sense of a particular identity is increasing and is being coupled with actions of intellectual and cultural enhancing. However, even careful attempts of the new Pontian intellectuals to express verbally or in writing the history, the cultural identity of this people, are facing harsh measures by the Turkish authorities. During the last years the lives of the Pontian intellectuals who dare to express their views are reliably reported to be threatened, some of them with death. This repression is accompanied by pseudo-scientific attempts to distort the three thousand year-old rich history of this people and of this area. Those attempts are made by Turkish propagandists and by so-called professors. The official discourse claims that this historic people is of Turkish descent. A typical example of this conduct of the authorities is a television series performed some time ago in Trapezous, in which a retired officer of the Turkish army and a would-be professor hammered on the one hand, the Turkish descent of the Pontians and on the other, uttered threats towards the Pontians who claim the right to keep contacts with Pontians in

Greece. Moreover, Pontian travelers from Greece during their visits in Pontos, are subjected to strict control and surveillance by the Turkish authorities.

Repressive measures endanger language

It appears that a sizeable part of the islamized Pontians, especially the communities of Trapezous, Tonia, Ophe, Sourmena (Surmene), Matsouka (Macka) as well as those of the peripheral municipalities of Contantinople (Istanbul) have preserved intact their Pontian language. Thus, in those areas, the language which is known to be the closest to the ancient Greek is kept alive. In fact, this language is today illegal in Pontos and in Turkey. Of course there is no school where the Pontians could learn, cultivate and develop their language. The existing schools are Turkish. The young Pontian boys and girls - especially those from the inland - due to the fact that their families cling to their own language and do not know Turkish, have their first contact with this language in the Turkish schools and are forced to learn it with harsh educational methods. It is reported that in the elementary schools there exists a network of young student-informers in charge of denouncing to their teachers the Pontian pupils speaking between themselves their own language, who are then taken up by their teachers or even the police with brutal methods of persuasion. In the high schools, the task of terrorization is apparently devoted to racist and fascist groups, inter alia the "Grey Wolves". Those educational conditions exclude the Pontian students from university and higher studies. Students of Pontian descent who try to express their Pontian conscience and culture through periodicals run a risk of being sentenced to jail by the Turkish authorities.

The Turkish state through policies stemming from its constitutional and legal framework together with its authoritarian structures, eliminates the words Pontos and Pontians, and represses individual and collective attempts of peaceful expression of the thought and conscience of the Pontian identity.

Expression of the Pontian culture must be saved

Describing this situation , the International League for the Rights and Liberation of Peoples (LIDLIP) would like to insist on the lack of freedom of expression of a particular people, the Pontians in present-day Turkey. This situation ought to be known by the international community. Further, interventions towards its alleviation is a step for safeguarding a living culture which has enriched mankind.